

# League of Spies

By Aaron Allston; Illustration by Tommy Lee Edwards

"I'm here to make your day a lucky one," Joram said.

The head he addressed had sharp, intelligent features surrounded by a neatly trimmed black beard and mustache. The man who owned it had the door to his quarters open only a few centimeters so Joram couldn't see the rest of his body.

The man said nothing. He glanced over Joram's shoulder to the landspeeder lane beyond, a city thoroughfare that was crowded with fast-moving speeders and slower delivery flats.

Joram repeated, "I'm here to make your day--"

The door slid fully open, revealing the man to be of Joram's above-average height. He was as broad in the shoulder as Joram but more muscular. He wore close-fitting black garments that were completely out of style on this color-mad, comfort-conscious world. He seized the collar of Joram's tunic and yanked.

Joram couldn't help but lean forward, but caught himself on the doorjamb with one hand --a lucky one -- he concluded.

"Get in here."

"Countersign."

"I'm your mission commander, and I say get in here instantly."

Joram grinned. "My blaster in your gut says I stay here until I hear the correct countersign."

The man looked down. A holdout blaster, small enough to be dwarfed by Joram's right hand, was indeed pressed into his stomach.

"I am very proficient in the combat arts and I knew that was there," the man said. "I could have taken it from you at any time."

"Countersign." Joram held his smile. A red dot danced around on the chest and neck of the man he faced, but the fellow couldn't see it. If he tried to seize the blaster, he would die.

The man sighed. "'You don't need luck when you're as well-placed as I am.'"

"Correct." Joram returned the blaster to the holster against the base of his spine.

"Now get in here."

"And my partner?"

"Partner?"

"The one in the alley across the landspeeder lane. The one with the laser rifle pointed at your eye."

The man glared over Joram's shoulder.



"Oh, him. I was wondering if you meant a second partner. Sure, have him over."

Joram crooked two fingers over his shoulder and beckoned.

Moments later, Mapper dodged traffic to cross the landspeeder lane and join them. He was a well-built man with dark hair, beard, and mustache that made his features seem brooding; he wore the lightweight, flowing garments common to this world of Tarhassan and carried an elongated case with the words "Pebdy Plumbing Supplies" stenciled on the side. The owner of the dwelling turned to lead Joram and Mapper inside.

The main living chamber was decorated in an even more mismatched and garish fashion than the spaceport had been. The room's gold-brown tikkiwood paneling clashed with the overstuffed red-and-white-striped furniture that reminded Joram of overweight tourists at a beach resort. Two people were already there, a man and a woman arrayed upon and, in the woman's case, almost swallowed by the billowy furniture.

"All right, we're all here," their host said. "Let's get back to it. Our objective--"

"Maybe introductions first?" Joram said.

The man stood still for several moments, saying nothing, but his lips moved. It took Joram a moment to realize that he was counting to ten. "All right, all right," the man said. "I'm Cherek Tuhm." He cocked his head, looking at Joram as though waiting for a response.

Joram offered his hand. "Joram Kithe. And this is my partner, Mapper Gann."

Mapper gave the others a curt nod; he didn't speak. He seldom did, except to Joram. Mapper wasn't comfortable in most social situations. Only Joram and his superiors knew that Mapper was a clone trooper, one of the thousands of warriors bred to fight the Republic's wars. Mapper had belonged to a unit of enhanced clones, men with more personal initiative than most of their cohorts. Injured in the mission where he'd met Joram, he'd been unable to rejoin his unit for several weeks, so his supervisors had assigned him to Joram as bodyguard and partner -- in part so that Joram could continue evaluating the virtues of clone troopers. Now operating with a new name, Mapper was unused to living outside the regimented and homogenized society of his peers. At least he did a fair job of concealing his unease.

Cherek ignored Joram's hand. He gestured to the woman. "Tinian Hanther." She was of less-than-average height and slender, middle-aged, with aristocratic features and intelligent eyes. She wore expensive jade-green garments in the local style plus a turban to match. She offered Joram and Mapper a brief smile and a nod.

Obviously wearying of the social niceties that were keeping him from his briefing, Cherek gestured dismissively at the last person present. "And Livintius Sazet. Can I stop wasting time now? I'm only the mission commander."

Livintius was humanoid but not human. Also middle-aged, the Falleen wore his graying black hair long in a ponytail. His skin had a greenish tinge to it, and his eyes, though human in configuration, had a reptilian aloofness to them. His features were broad, his forehead high. He wore local garments in blues that contrasted well with his skin tone. He gave Joram and Mapper a little smile. "You are correct, Cherek. You are only the mission commander. Now we'll vote to see whether or not you may proceed."

"That's not funny." Cherek flopped into one of the overstuffed chairs. As he sank into it, it settled with a noise like an asthmatic bantha letting out a long breath. "You two, sit."

Joram did. Mapper set his rifle case against a bare section of wall and stood there.

Cherek shook his head a long moment, his manner that of a parent who has finally despaired of his children ever accomplishing anything in life, then leaned forward, making his chair wheeze again. "Here's the situation," he said. "As you know, this world of Tarhassan has recently declared itself for the Separatists, a surprise to the Republic."

Joram frowned. "Why didn't the Republic Intelligence team here warn us about their defection?" Every world within the Republic had an Intelligence team, even if that team consisted of a pair of agents who spent most of their time watching broadcast entertainments.

"Aha!" Cherek said. His expression suggested that his children might not be irredeemable after all. "The Intelligence team here disappeared six days before the government announced for the Separatists. Our goal is to find him."

"Him?" Tinian looked offended. "The entire team here was just a him?"

Cherek nodded. "His name is Edbit Teeks. His partner retired a few months ago, and, things being so settled and tame here, Intelligence didn't get around to worrying about a replacement for several weeks. It was during those weeks that the Clone Wars began. At that point, allocation of resources became problematic."

"So," Joram asked, "what do we know about this Teeks' disappearance?"

Livintius shook his head. "No, no. no. That's not next."

"Not next?" Joram reheated

"On the agenda." At Joram's blank stare, Livintius continued, "I've drawn up a formal agendas for this meeting. Here." He reached behind his seat, causing the furniture to whuff and sigh, then leaned forward to hand Joram a printout.

Joram glanced over it. It began:

#### **Republic Intelligence Meeting**

Tarhassan, Quarters of Cherek Tuhm

1. Gathering of the Operatives
  1. Cherek Tuhm
  2. Tinian Hanther
  3. Livintius Sazet
  4. Joram Kithe
2. Prebriefing Synopsis
  1. Where We Are
  2. Why We're Here (Mission Objectives)
3. Getting To Know You
4. Formal Briefing
  1. Objective Summary
  2. Resources
  3. Break for Snacks (Optional)
  4. Presentation of Pre-Gathered Information

Joram read on and on. The agenda, printed in small text, filled the page.

"I apologize," Livintius said, "for not including the name of your partner on the agenda. I didn't know he'd be coming. You can be certain that the updated version will include it."

Joram cleared his throat. "I don't mean to criticize--"

"Don't feel at all bad about it, young man," Livintius said. "I'm always striving to improve my work. Take your best shot. The worst that can happen is that my next agenda will be even better."

"Yes. Well, I have no objection to the agenda as such. But let's say that you were nabbed by our counterparts in PlanSec, Tarhassan Planetary Security, shortly after you printed this. They'd know the rest of our names and where we were meeting. They'd be able to grab us up, too."

Livintius sat back, his brow furrowed, thinking hard. "I'll be ... You're entirely correct. That would have been disastrous. Let's bring this up again when we get to 'New Business.'"

"You're, um, new to Intelligence, aren't you?"

Livintius brightened. "Which brings us right into Item Three, Getting to Know You. Yes, I am. As are we all."

Joram looked at the others. "How's that again?"

Tinian smiled. "Well, not to put too fine a point on it, but our Intelligence careers, and the creation of this temporary unit, are all results of your success on Pengalan. Yes, we know who you are and what you've done, Joram."

What Joram had done was accompany a military expedition to the world of Pengalan. That campaign to win the world back from the Separatists had failed, and Joram had been stranded there with a squadron of clone troopers. Joram, then an accountant from the Ministry of Finance, had worked with the troopers, and their combined skills had allowed a number of them to get off that world alive. "So, in running away successfully, I--"

"No, not that." She shook her head, and her voice took on a condescending tone. "Your success demonstrated the degree to which an operative from Finance could contribute to Intelligence operations. Immediately after your report was evaluated, a subcommittee of the Republic Senate recommended that Intelligence begin a pilot program to evaluate the suitability of experts from other government divisions."

Joram felt his heart sink. "So not one of you was in Intelligence prior to my mission on Pengalan."

"That's right," Cherek said. "Though the intensive training we've received, our personal competence, and pure intellect more than makes up for any deficits of experience."

"More than *make up*," Livintius said. "Subject-verb agreement, Cherek."

"Yes, yes."

Joram decided that it might undermine the group's confidence if he were to cradle his head in his hands. Sobbing would probably make the situation even worse.

"So," he managed to choke out, "where are you all from, originally?"

"Ministry of Licenses and Permits," Cherek said. "But I've been training in hand-to-hand combat all my life. I've been the Ministry of Licenses and Permits hand-to-hand combat champion for eight consecutive years."

"I'm from the Department of Health," Tinian said, pride in her voice. "Flora. I specialize in grains."

"I've held positions in both the Ministry of Public Information and the Ministry of Education," Livintius said. "In truth, I've spent my entire adult life in the hallowed halls of education, and let me tell you, transferring to Intelligence was just the opportunity I needed to couple practical experience with the cool perspective of academia."

"Your background we know," Tinian said. "And your partner?"

"Mapper's an ex-trooper," Joram said. "He's been on the front lines."

Cherek turned a cold look on Mapper. Joram supposed the man felt threatened by the presence of someone with actual, rather than tournament, combat experience. Mapper ignored him.

"Well," Cherek said. "I think we've accomplished Getting to Know You. Next?" Livintius beamed. "Item Four, Formal Briefing. Sub-Item A, Objective Summary."

Cherek took over. "We know that Edbit Teeks was reported missing by his lover, Zazana Renkel, a local woman; her statement indicated that she saw him being grabbed off the lane in front of her quarters. A little research into her background reveals that she's a member of PlanSec. And since the Book says that an Intelligence operative should not get emotionally involved with locals, we can presume that Teeks believed he was working her without her knowledge when she was, in fact, aware of his true role and working him. Obviously, she arranged for his arrest."

Joram frowned. "If she had him grabbed, why file a report about his disappearance and leave a trail back to herself?"

"Aha!" Cherek said. "To establish her innocence in the face of further inquiry, of course. And she obviously fooled you. But not me. Now -- where was I?"

"Arranged for his arrest," Tinian said. "Do keep up, Cherek."

"Right, right. So our task is to grab her and force her to tell us where he is. Once she's done that, we'll find it easier to reacquire him."

Livintius nodded sagely. "Rescue missions are much more efficacious when one knows where the object is being held."

Joram listened with half his attention. The other half struggled with the sense of doom that had descended on him, and with questions: Was it simple incompetence or some sort of secret effort to undermine the Republic's Intelligence community that had led to the establishment of this team? And what crime had he, Joram, committed to be attached to it?

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"No more new business?" Cherek asked.

The others all shook their heads, even Mapper. The trooper was finally in one of the chairs. He looked as though he were contemplating the heat-entropy death of the galaxy.

Joram was numb. His butt was numb from hours of sitting. His mind was numb from hours of adherence to parliamentary procedure.

Cherek heaved a happy sigh. "Final item, then. Setting up a time and place for our next meeting. I recommend reconvening here, immediately after we've grabbed Zazana Renkel."

"When will that be?" asked Livintius.

"We can't be sure," Cherek said. "The operation to grab her is pretty simple, but there are time-related variables."

Livintius' mouth turned down. "These minutes, which constitute a portion of our official report, would be better if we could indicate a precise time."

Cherek considered. "You're right. How about midnight, local time, or immediately after we return from grabbing the Renkel woman, whichever is later?"

Livintius brightened again. "That'll work."

"Before we vote on that," Tinian said, "how about we set it for after we've interrogated the Renkel woman? That way, we'll have set up the inclusion of her responses into the next set of minutes."

"Ooh," Livintius said. "Good idea."

"Let's make this march," Cherek said. "Incorporating Tinian's revision, all in favor?"

"Wait," Tinian said, "no one seconded."

Livintius raised his hand. "I second."

"All in favor?" Cherek repeated.

There were five ayes.

"Move to adjourn," Cherek said.

"Second," Tinian said.

"All in favor?"

There were five ayes.

"Before we go," Cherek said, "everyone get into whatever you use for stealth-dress, hit the 'fresher, and visit the snack table again." He heaved himself upright, his chair sighing in relief, and headed toward one of the other rooms in the apartment. Tinian moved off toward another room, and Livintius materialized beside the snack table.

Joram looked at Mapper. "Kill me."

"You kill me first."

"I'm senior, and I want you to kill me."

"Cherek's the mission commander. Let's both kill him."

"I second. All in favor?"

There were two ayes.

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Joram decided that Tarhassan was a pretty world by night as well as by day. As he and his team cruised the skyways of the city of Nehass, he could see a horizon-to-horizon vista of lights and buildings. The Tarhassans were obviously fond of colorful illuminations: One neighborhood would have pole-suspended streetlights in green, another in orange-yellow; the business district had many buildings that rose to altitudes of sixty or eighty stories, their curved architectural elements and beveled corners subtly lit in blue.

In the dark, however, he couldn't see all the civic activities he'd glimpsed on his initial trip to Cherek's quarters -- the construction of hardened gunnery bunkers, the drilling of infantry, the setup of watch-stations on tall buildings, all part of the planet's preparations for war.

In fact, he could enjoy only a portion of the night view, stuck as he was in the rear seat of the closed-top airspeeder. Cherek insisted on controlling the vehicle, and Livintius had shrieked "Gunnery seat!" as soon as they approached the vehicle. Consequently, Livintius had some sort of right to sit in the front passenger seat, so Joram and Mapper were stuck in the back with Tinian.

Crammed in the back was more like it. The airspeeder was a compact model with powerful engines, but it had a passenger compartment ideally suited for two adults in front and shopping bags in back.

Joram said, "Where does this Renkel woman go?"

"Eh?" Cherek said.

"There's really not much room for a hostage back here. How big is the cargo compartment?"

"No cargo compartment," Cherek said. "We rented this one for speed."

"And style," Livintius added. "Intelligence agents should have style."

"Besides," Cherek said, "she's not a hostage. She's a prisoner of war."

"So where does the prisoner go?"

Cherek and Livintius looked at one another. "Across your laps?" Cherek said.

"I don't think so," Joram said.

"I'm the mission leader, and I say--"

"We'll vote on it, as usual. But there're three of us in the back, and we're the ones who'll have her across our laps, so I predict we'll all vote against." Joram got an immediate nod from Mapper, and, after a moment of consideration, a matching nod from Tinian. "See?"

Cherek sighed, vexed. "All right. We'll put Tinian up here between me and Livintius. Then you can have the hostage--"

"Prisoner of war," Livintius corrected.

"--prisoner of war between you. That way everyone's equally uncomfortable. Ah, here we are."

Cherek pushed the controls forward and sent the airspeeder into a power dive. Joram grabbed at the restraining straps. They held him in place but somehow let his stomach drift alarmingly within his body. The ground got bigger fast, its landspeeders starting as distant toys but growing in seconds to fast-moving traffic.

Joram looked over at Mapper; the trooper was holding on to his own straps with one hand and the seat back in front of him with the other, and Tinian was desperately holding on to him.

Then the world tilted again, and the landspeeders they were diving toward became landspeeders rushing straight at them. Joram felt the airspeeder shudder as its hull scraped the ground. They were skidding, turning the world beyond the windscreen into a whirl of lights that wobbled and shook. Finally they were still.

"Good job," Livintius said. "Not far from a parking slot." The aging academic seemed calm, although his skin had become reddish. It now began to fade back to its normal hue.

They were on a landspeeder lane, parked at an incorrect angle a meter from the raised walkway on one side. On the other side was a residential building. Although a midget by Coruscant standards, it rose high enough to loom over surrounding residences, twenty stories at least, and had a marquee sign on the front that read "Liezder Towers."

A moment later the words faded and were replaced by "Coruscant Living at Tarhassan Rates."

"I'm going to throw up," Tinian said. "Wait until we get back to my quarters," Cherek suggested. "Now, we have to -- what's the sub-agenda, Livintius?"

"Item One, enter the building without being seen. Two, eliminate anyone who sees us. Does that mean we get to kill them?"

"If absolutely necessary."

Livintius offered a sigh of satisfaction. "Three, determine which quarters belong to Zazana Renkel. Four, proceed to that set of quarters. Five, enter those quarters. Six, determine whether Renkel is there. And now we branch. If she's there--"

"That's enough for now," Cherek said. "Let's start on the operational details. Entering without being detected."

"There she is," said Mapper.

"We could pretend to be comlink repairers," Tinian said. "We'll need to acquire service uniforms. We'd enter the lobby and tell the security personnel that Renkel has reported a comlink outage."

"So he calls her on his comlink, and she denies it," Livintius said.

Cherek shook his head. "Back it up a step. Before that, we kill the power to the building so the comlink outage is plausible."

Tinian considered. "Then we'd need to be power-grid repairers, wouldn't we?"

"There she is," Mapper said again. He was pointing through the airspeeder's transparisteel windscreen. A woman, tall, lean, and dark-haired, dressed in a dark blue uniform with orange trim, was thirty meters from the front of the building and approaching it at a rapid walk.

"Yes, yes," Cherek said. "Livintius, when she goes in, you can strike Item Six and the 'she's not home yet' branch. Now, how do we get to the building's power controls?"

"But we can grab her now," Joram said.

"What, and spoil the plan?"

Joram growled to himself, a credible imitation of a holodrama rancor. "Mapper, go get her, standard talk and pop."

"Thank you," Mapper said. The relief in his voice suggested he'd been given a reprieve from a death sentence. He hit the button beside him, and the airspeeder door slid up and out of the way.

"Wait, wait," Cherek said.

Mapper didn't wait. He unstrapped himself in an instant, untangled himself from Tinian's grip in another, and moved toward the woman.

Joram took a look around. There were pedestrians on this walkway and others on the one opposite, but none within forty or fifty meters. He drew his Intelligence-issued blaster -- his primary weapon, not the holdout weapon -- and switched it over to its stun setting.

"You can't do this," Cherek said. "You can't just jettison the plan we spent so much time creating. That way lies anarchy and confusion."

"He's right, you know," Tinian said.

"You're demonstrating a marked tendency toward rebellion and aggression," Livintius said.

Tinian looked thoughtful. "A dietary imbalance could be contributing to your bad attitude, Joram."

Joram ignored them. Over on the walkway, Mapper and the woman now stood together. Mapper gestured up and down the landspeeder lane like a lost tourist, a role he'd played before. Joram steadied his blaster in the viewport frame of the aircar and squeezed the trigger.

A blast of light sizzled across to strike the woman in the torso. She jerked in a full-body spasm and began to fall backward.

Mapper caught her, swinging her arm up over his shoulders, tucking her in close to him as though she were a close friend who'd had too much to drink. Still talking, Mapper hauled her back toward the airspeeder.

Joram lowered his blaster out of sight and took stock of the potential witnesses. Several of them had obviously heard the noise of the blaster and were looking around. Two, not far away, were staring at Mapper and the unconscious woman in some confusion. But there was no visual evidence to convince them that a crime was being committed. "Tinian, you need to be in the front seat."

"Right." She snapped out of what looked like a momentary trance. She slid out Mapper's door and moved around to stand beside the front passenger door. "Livintius, let me in."

The aged Falleen opened it and stood as Mapper reached the air-speeder. "This is very irregular--"

"Gunnery seat!" Tinian said. Her face was suddenly alight with a victorious smile.

"Oh, blast you." Livintius got back into the airspeeder and slid over to take the middle seat. Tinian hopped in beside him, looking smug.

Mapper levered the unconscious woman in through the open door. Joram dragged her in beside him; Mapper crowded in and sealed the door. "Ready to go," Joram said. With a snarl, Cherek returned his attention to the controls. In a moment they were airborne. "Joram, I'm going to report your insubordination and insolence to our superior as soon as we get back to the safe house. And you'll be shipped out of here with a black mark on your record. Or you can promise not to countermand my explicit orders, or the explicit plans worked up by this committee, ever again. What's it going to be?"

"So my experience and initiative, which have saved you hours and limited danger to this unit, don't mean anything to you."

"No, they don't. You're not our intellectual equal. Your experience is obviously irrelevant and your initiative is nothing but rebellion. Now, you can obey or go home in disgrace. What's it going to be?"

Joram set his jaw. He wanted Cherek to send him home. It might keep him from getting killed.

But then Cherek, Tinian, and Livintius would foul up their mission, and they would be caught or killed. Maybe Mapper, too. Cherek hadn't said anything about sending Mapper back. And if he ordered Mapper to stay, the loyal and determined clone trooper might just feel obligated to obey.

"Well?" Cherek repeated.

Finally Joram was able to work his jaw again. "All right," he said. "I promise."

"Not good enough. I want your word of honor. Repeat my instructions back to me so we're all on the same item on the agenda."

Cherek's neck looked very vulnerable. Joram could reach up, give the man's head a twist, and snap it. He had been taught how. Every word was like a stone he had to cough up from his guts. "All right. I give my word of honor that I will not countermand your direct orders or the agreed-upon plans of this ... committee."

"Good enough," Cherek said. "For now."

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"I don't know where he is," the woman protested.

She was in one of the chairs in Cherek's rented quarters, and just binding her there had been quite a feat. The billowy furniture had no loops, holes, distinct legs or other components that would permit ropes to be firmly attached, so instead of ropes they'd had to use broad silver binder-tape. Layer upon layer of the stuff adhered her limbs to the furniture. More layers crossed her forehead, holding her head back against the puffy headrest.

Zazana Renkel was a good-looking woman, Joram decided, not holodrama beautiful, but every-man-working-with-her-would-gravitate-to-her attractive, with dark brown eyes and a manner of expressing herself that suggested intelligence. She was doing what she could to hide the fact that she was very afraid.

Of course she was afraid. Joram would be afraid, too, if he were being interrogated by five masked lunatics.

The masks were cheap rubber things Livintius had bought. They all bore the same face, a broad set of male features marked with horizontal bands of war paint in red, yellow, and black. Livintius had said that they commemorated a hero from Tarhassan melodramas. So in addition to everything else, the spies were interrogating the woman with the face of one of the local cultural icons.

"Don't pretend you didn't know Edbit was with Republic Intelligence," Cherek said.

Renkel's eyes opened wide. "What?"

Joram sighed silently. In his peripheral vision, he saw Mapper begin to bang his head on the wall.



"We don't much care for liars, you know." Cherek drew a deep breath and expelled it as if banishing the demons of petty irritation. "But we might forgive you if you tell us where you're interrogating him."

"I don't -- I didn't -- I really don't--"

"Oh, come on," Cherek said. "Don't tell me you didn't get lots of praise and a big bonus for bringing in the sole Republic Intelligence agent on your planet."

"But--"

Joram grabbed Cherek by his shirt and yanked, hauling the man down the short hall and into the ground-floor bedroom. Cherek uttered a protracted "Hey ..." as he was drawn along.

Joram slid the door shut behind the two of them and pulled his mask off. He tried very hard to keep his voice reasonable. "Cherek, do you know what you just did wrong?"

Cherek pulled his own mask off. His face was flushed, but it looked as though he was merely overheated from the mask. "You're walking dangerously close to insubordination again."

"No, I'm within the parameters of my promise. Listen. In the course of this interrogation, you've given her more information than you've received. If she didn't know before that Teeks was Intelligence, she does now. And even if she did, she might not have known that he was the only Intelligence officer on-world ... and she does now. You see?"

Cherek considered. "Uh ... damn."

"So when we go out there again, either I can take over the questioning--"

"Or I can continue, implementing your suggestions. Which is what we'll do. Thank you." The last two words sounded slightly less grudging than usual.

Joram turned away, put his mask back on, and slid the door open again.

In the main room, Renkel was saying, "So Tarhassan rates only one Intelligence officer? Total? I mean, not even support personnel?"

Livintius, his voice soothing, said, "Don't take it so hard, young lady. I'm sure you're really a very dangerous world at heart. There are five more now; is that better?"

Behind Joram, Cherek said, "Livintius, you idiot."

Everyone in the room turned to look at him. Joram, seeing Mapper's eyes widen behind his eye-slits, also turned.

Cherek's face was now flushed with anger as well as heat. Joram could see this because the man's mask was still in his hand.

Cherek charged forward, grabbed Livintius by the arm, and hauled him back into the bedroom. Tinian followed.

Mapper put his head into his hands. His shoulders shook as he tried to repress sobs.

Joram returned to the bedroom and listened to Cherek repeat Joram's own words of a moment ago.

As Cherek reached the end of the spiel and took a breath, Joram said, "And there's another problem. Now she's seen your face and heard Livintius' name."

"Eh?" Cherek looked at him, then glanced at the mask still in his hand. "Oh. Yes, that is a problem."

"She can identify us," Livintius said. He sounded breathless. He pulled off his own mask. His eyes were shining. "We have to kill her."

"Wait, no," Tinian said.

Cherek looked uncomfortable. "I don't know."

"We're not going to get anything more out of her," Livintius said. "She's tough. Let's kill her now."

"That's not right," Tinian said.

"Not a good idea," Joram said. "You and she both belong to the same intelligence community, even though you're on opposite sides right now. But in six months, five years, you may be working together ... or you may be on opposite sides but have a common enemy. You'll need to have relationships with people in the trade you can trust -- within limits. People you know won't kill unnecessarily."

Livintius shook his head, vigorous in his new desire. "This is absolutely necessary," he said. "She can endanger our mission and our departure from this world. We have to kill her. Kill kill kill."

Cherek's troubled expression cleared. "I hate to say it, but Livintius is right."

"Have you ever killed a prisoner of war?" Joram asked.

"Well," Cherek said, "of course I've killed. I am very--"

"Proficient in the combat arts," Livintius and Tinian said.

Cherek glared at them.

"But have you ever killed a prisoner?" Joram continued. "Someone who is helpless?"

"No."

Livintius and Tinian also shook their heads.

"Do you want to?"

"Well, it's not ... sporting," Cherek said.

"Though it would be interesting to watch," Livintius said.

"Then leave it to Mapper." Joram looked toward the living room as if he could see through the intervening walls. "He's a merciless killer. He'll not only eliminate her, he'll dispose of her in such a way that they'll never find the body. He's very fond of construction sites and duracrete foundations."

"Ah," both men said, new wisdom and respect in their voices. Tinian said nothing. She glared at all of them.

Joram put his mask back on.

"No need for that now," said Cherek.

"Yes, there is. If we all three go out there with our masks off, she'll know that we intend to kill her. She's a cunning PlanSec operative, remember?"

"Oh, right." Cherek nodded in confused agreement.

When they returned to the main chamber, Mapper was kneeling beside Renkel's chair. She was talking. "... snatched him off the street. I was walking home as usual and couldn't catch up to their speeder. I don't know why he was taken. And I don't know why you've taken me. I'm only a civilian employee. I don't have access to any important information. I do statistical analyses of criminal activity databases."

"Ooh," Livintius whispered. "Now I'm sorry we have to kill her. The conversations we could have--"

"Shhhh," Cherek cautioned.

"So," Renkel continued, "he couldn't just have been using me. There would be no point to it, would there? I think he loved me. I know I love him." There was desperation in her voice, and she stared into Mapper's half-concealed eyes as if seeking affirmation in them.

"I suspect you're right," Mapper said. "I mean, the most he could get from you would be -- what? Identification documents that would get him into your building?" Renkel nodded, and Mapper continued, "And if that was all he wanted, then he'd have taken it and left you. Correct?"

"Yes!" There was relief in her voice.

"So I'm sure his feelings for you were genuine," Mapper said. "Do you think he's hurt?" she asked.

Livintius said, "Probably being tortured. Do you think he'd stand up well to torture?"

"We don't torture people!"

"Of course you do," Livintius shot back. "Everyone but the Republic tortures captives."

"He's kidding," Joram said. "You'd know better than we would, right?" Renkel nodded again.

Mapper, his voice soothing, continued, "So he's been locked up, and he's fine, and he's waiting for this war to be over so he can rejoin you. It's as simple as that."

Renkel let out a long sigh of relief. "How much longer are you going to hold me?"

Joram moved around behind her and silently drew his blaster. He checked to make sure that it was still on its stun setting.

"Not long," Mapper said. "You've been very cooperative."

Joram aimed. Mapper stepped back and away from the woman. Joram shot her again and watched the balloonlike chair convulse as the shock hit her system.

"It might be better to kill her now," Livintius said, his voice breathy. He pulled his mask free.

The others followed suit. Joram shook his head. "Forensics might detect minute traces of carbonized flesh in this chamber if we did. Better to kill her well away from here."

Mapper stared at him, wide-eyed. Joram allowed a sinister smile to play across his lips. "Like those guys we took out to get into the spacecraft bay on Pengalan. We'll do the same to her ... only worse."

Mapper thought about it and his expression cleared. They'd done nothing more than hammer those two men unconscious and leave them tied up. "So I'll need ..."

"Just a blaster pistol ... and the *medical bag*." Joram tried to make the two words sound as though they'd originated in some mythological hell. In his peripheral vision, he saw Tinian shudder. Livintius smiled.

"I'll come with you as backup," Joram continued, "if the boss permits. I expect the three of them will all be needed to work out the operational details for the next step of the plan."

"Right," Mapper said.

"What is our next step?" Livintius asked.

"Teeks was snatched by PlanSec," Cherek said. "Without question. So we need to plan a rescue raid on the main PlanSec building here in the capital. They wouldn't imprison him in any place less important."

\* \* \*

"We're working for idiots," Mapper said. "And you promised to do everything they said." He was in control of the airspeeder, maneuvering it at legal rates along well-posted sky-routes above Nehass.

Joram shook his head. "I promised to obey Cherek's orders and the dictates of their horrible committee. I didn't promise to do anything else they said. I didn't promise not to figure out how to get them to do what I want ... which I have. And I didn't promise not to do things on my own. Speaking of which ..." He opened up his datapad. "I'm bringing up a map. I want you to drop me off there."

"Beam it to the nav computer. What is it?"

"Edbit Teeks' home. I'm going to give it a close look while you make Renkel comfortable. That trio of irredeemables thinks that Teeks had no local resources, which is an impossibility I need to disprove. When you're done, come back for me."

Mapper smiled. "Now I feel better."

Mapper dropped Joram off a short distance from the housing tower that had been Edbit Teeks' public address. Mapper returned to the air as soon as Joram sealed the door. It wouldn't do to remain on the ground long enough for a pedestrian to see the woman-shaped disposal bag stretched across the back seat. Renkel, under the influence of the sedatives from the medical bag, would remain asleep for hours, perhaps the better part of a day. Mapper would find a place to conceal her where she was likely to remain undiscovered until hours past the Intelligence team's departure from Tarhassan. Joram would ensure that the team would leave before tomorrow was very old.

Teeks' building was shorter and broader than Renkel's. Its duracrete face, stippled and dyed to resemble natural stone, was dark from age. The north face, thick with balconies, overlooked a park. No one walked in the park, and guardsmen, dressed in the fluttery orange-and-gold livery of Tarhassan's armed forces, stood watchfully in the northeast and southwest corners. The west face, which was where the primary building entrance was located, had no balconies, but many broad viewports gave its residents a fine look down at the landspeeder lane below.

The building lobby was unguarded, wall sensors permitting access to its turbolifts. Renkel's pockets had yielded up a transparisteel cylinder containing many of the planet's coin-shaped magnetic access disks, and when Joram held the cylinder up to a sensor, the turbolift doors opened.

Teeks' quarters were on the sixth floor. His door, a powered slider, was sealed by a magnetic coupler marked "Planetary Security." Joram took a moment to assure himself that no one was moving down the floor's hallway, then went to work disengaging the coupler. This was one of many skills he'd acquired since joining Republic Intelligence, and the coupler, designed to keep the mildly curious out or alert security forces if the very curious forced their way through, soon disengaged. Then Renkel's cylinder of disks gave him access to the darkened interior.

The quarters were lightly furnished. The fact that there wasn't much furniture meant that there was not much wreckage to clean up; someone had put the place through an amateurish and destructive search. The two sofa-chairs in the main room, one a single and the other a double-wide, had been slashed open, their stuffing pulled free; no longer restrained by the chair coverings, the stuffing had swelled to three times or more its normal volume, making portions of the room look like an artificial fungus forest. The thick green foam-carpet on the floor contributed to the impression.

The table between the exterior viewport and the narrower sofa-chair had been knocked down. A table lamp with a distinctive swing-out glowrod arm was on the floor, toppled but intact. In the bedchamber, the plush, freestanding mattress had been shredded, and its swollen contents made the chamber appear to be full of the primordial ancestorsof the main chamber's fungal growths.

The wreckage held little interest for Joram. It would have been thoroughly sifted through by PlanSec. It was not likely there would be anything for him to find. In fact, he was looking for one crucial thing the security forces were less likely to detect, and he'd already seen it. From the bedchamber, he recovered an intact low table. He positioned this beside the front viewport, put the lamp atop it, swung the arm out so that the glowrod was directly in front of the transparisteel, and switched the lamp on. The glowrod was still intact, and suddenly the main chamber was illuminated.

The light was risky. There might still be security personnel on duty watching this place.

The lamp was a signalling device, used in a standard procedure to signal an agent's local resources. It was plausibly a reading lamp; Teeks could sit in the sofa-chair beside the viewport, keep the lamp arm near him, and read. But when circumstances called for it, he'd swing the arm out so that it shone in the viewport, as Joram had just done. Joram sat in the ruined chair. He drew his blaster and waited.

\* \* \*

A knock, light and tentative, awoke Joram. He reached over to turn the glowrod off, then called, "It's not sealed."

The hallway door opened. A diminutive male stood there, his silhouetted features indistinct. He moved in quickly, letting the door slide shut behind him. "Greetings," the man said, his voice deep, out of proportion to his small stature. "I'm not sure I have the correct building. I've come about the rental quarters?"

"No need for a cover story," Joram said. "The lamp signal was deliberate. You're a local working with Teeks. What do I call you?"

The silhouette sagged just a little, perhaps in relief. "Tharb."

"I don't think I've run into that name before."

"It's not a name. It's a code name. It's a bug. A Tarhassan bug."

"Ah. How long has it been since you've been compensated?"

"Since Teeks was taken."

With his free hand, Joram fished around in a pocket and brought up some credchips, generic ones he'd exchanged for gold at the spaceport, not traceable to him. He calculated their value against what he knew were standard rates for local informer services and put two of them on the table with the lamp. "You can have these when I'm gone."

"Thank you."

"Why was Teeks taken?"

Tharb shrugged. "PlanSec investigators showed up at the restaurant, Corgan's Gustatorium, where I usually make exchanges with him. I happened to be there."

*You work there, Joram decided. Now I can find you again.*

"They asked very specific questions about his visits to the restaurant, about anyone he might have met there regularly."

*But no one could remember any patron he met regularly. And since you're free, no one remembered that you were his regular server.*

"I raced over here as soon as I could get free, but I was delayed by circumstances."

*You had to wait until your shift was over.*

"And I saw them take him."

Joram considered. "By any chance, did you follow them when they took him away?"

"Yes, I did."

Joram added another two credchips to the little pile on the table. *Either you sold him out and risked nothing by following them, or you're a daring resource and we badly want to keep you.* "Where did they take him?"

"The main office of Planetary Security, downtown."

Joram managed to keep an expression of dismay off his face -- an irrelevant effort, since his visitor couldn't see his features in the dark. Cherek, for all the wrong reasons, had been right about where Teeks was. It was going to hurt like hell to admit that. "Is there anything you can tell me about that building?"

"I can give you partial plans. Main entrance, interrogation areas, holding areas. Nothing about the vehicle bays, computer areas, anything like that."

*You're an ex-convict who's been there as a prisoner and are now working as a food server, Joram thought. "Good. On your datapad?"*

"On my datapad."

Joram brought out his own datapad. "Beam it over."

\* \* \*

Joram and Mapper reentered Cherek's quarters some three hours after they'd left. Mapper, coached in the role he was now to play, kept his features cold and still. Cherek, Tinian, and Livintius regarded the two of them with expressions mixing admiration with dread. Tinian's manner was weighted more toward horror as she watched Mapper. Joram smiled. Their expressions would really become alarmed if they knew that the supposed victim lay wrapped in blankets in the utilities shed of an abandoned construction site, sleeping off her drug-induced stupor.

"It's done," Joram said.

"About time. I hope Joram didn't slow you down too much, Mapper." Cherek gestured at the chamber's table, which now was only half-covered with snack food. The other half was littered with sheets of flimsi covered in hand-scrawled notes. "We do have a plan for the next stage of the investigation. Voted on, sealed, and approved."

"Sorry we didn't wait for you," Livintius said. "But we were all in agreement--"

"And with three voting in unison, our votes weren't needed," Joram said. "But I have some news. I hope it doesn't interfere with your operational plans."

Cherek looked offended by the possibility. "What news?"

"The Renkel woman confessed all before the poison took hold." Joram offered up a shudder at the pretended memory. "She admitted that she'd turned in her lover to PlanSec. He's being interrogated at the main facility. You were right all along, Cherek."

"I knew that."

"So what's our plan?" Mapper asked.

"Well, there are holes in it," Cherek said. There was weary admission in his voice. "And until we plug them, we can't launch our rescue. For instance, we need to know the layout of the building."

"Oh, I have that," Mapper said. "It was on Renkel's datapad. Just the section of the building she was familiar with. The cells and interrogation areas, mostly."

Cherek came half up out of his chair. "You still have that?"

"Of course. I took all her personal effects to dispose of separately. They're still in the speeder."

Cherek's smile suggested that he was ready to adopt Mapper and make him his heir. "Good work. Livintius, fill him in."

The academic Falleen preened, happy to be the center of attention. "Item One, Sub-Item A, Summary: Rescue Edbit Teeks from Planetary Security Building. Sub-Item B, Resources. The five of us, one rental airspeeder, this set of rented quarters, personal weapons and gear. Mapper, do you have explosives?"

"I do. We have only half a dozen shaped charges, though, all I could smuggle in."

"That might do.... Sub-Item C, Procedures. Dress one of us in simulated PlanSec uniform. That one accomplishes entry into PlanSec building, makes his way to an unobserved exterior portal, and admits the others. Seize PlanSec personnel and force them to lead the way to Teeks' cell. Force open Teeks' cell. Exit building; necessary improvisation here. Exit vicinity. Make immediate trip to spaceport for extraction."

"And now that we have a real, not simulated, PlanSec uniform,"

Cherek said, "we know who's going to perform the initial intrusion. If you're up to it, Tinian. You're the only one even close to Renkel's size."

Tinian considered, then nodded. "I'll do it. That woman gave her life so that Teeks could be rescued. I'm not going to let that be a waste."

Her tone surprised Joram. Renkel's supposed death had obviously shattered her naïveté. *There may be some hope for you after all*, he decided.

But he had to find some way to accompany her into the PlanSec buildings. Otherwise, she was not likely to get out alive.

\* \* \*

In what elsewhere was the quietest hour before the golden-orange Tarhassan dawn, the landspeeder lane in front of the Planetary Security building was busy with a shift change.

Tinian gulped, exited the airspeeder, and mingled with the crowd. She marched up the green duracrete stairs to the building's arched entrance. Closely following Mapper's instructions, she walked fast but not conspicuously so, her attention apparently on the datapad in her hand.

As she neared the main entryway, she held up Renkel's identity disk, waving it with simulated unconcern in front of the sensor, and passed into the lobby.

There was no alarm, no outcry, no sudden surge of officers toward the lobby. Joram, in the back seat, realized that he was holding his breath. Finally he let it out.

"No matter how many times you do this, it's never easy, huh?" asked Cherek. His tone suggested that he was one weary veteran talking to another.

Joram gestured toward the entrance. "Let's stay here to see if anything bad happens."

"No, let's get to our waiting point." Cherek put the airspeeder in motion, moving a block down the landspeeder lane, pulling it to the streetside around the first corner. Cherek's comlink beeped, indicating an incoming signal. He pulled it from its clip on his lapel. "This is Grimtaash-One, go."

Tinian's voice, hushed, came across the comlink's tiny speaker: "I'm in the basement."

"That was fast. Basement? You're supposed to be headed toward the cell block."

"I found out my identity disk doesn't get me into the secure hall to the building's interior. But I saw a worker coming out of a door to the basement near the hall access. I kept the door from closing and he didn't notice. There's no one down here. I can move around without being seen."

"Tinian," Cherek's voice was a pained whine. "That ... wasn't ... the plan."

"I know, I'm sorry. That was all I could do."

Cherek's lips moved silently, and Joram recognized that the man was counting to ten again. This time Cherek got to fifteen before he said, "What about accesses?"

"I've found one door frame already, but it's blocked with a duracrete slab. It's hard to move around down here. It's all caged areas filled with boxes of what I think is old evidence and files." They heard a quiet, high-pitched sneeze over the comlink. "Sorry. Dusty, too."

"Let me know when you've got something we can use. Grimtaash-One, out." Cherek replaced the comlink on his lapel, then looked confused. "Did I call her Grimtaash-Two, or by her name, the first time?"

Mapper said, "Her name."

Cherek began counting again.

\* \* \*

"I have a door," Cherek's lapel whispered. "It's heavy metal and it has all sorts of monitoring devices on it."

Cherek unclipped the comlink again. "Good, good. I'm going to give you to Mapper. Maybe Mapper can talk you through disabling them. Mapper's a good agent."

Mapper asked Tinian questions about the security array on the door, then began providing detailed instructions on how to deal with the devices. Joram half-listened but kept most of his attention on the surrounding speeders and pedestrians. Traffic was increasing, and four people sitting for a protracted period in a parked airspeeder would eventually become conspicuous.

"I think I've got it," Tinian said. "The last display is green now. It reads 'Clear.'"

"Good job," Mapper said. "I'm giving you back to the boss." He handed the comlink over. "The door's about halfway along the north wall. She hears speeder traffic, so it's exterior."

"We're coming for you, Grimtaash-Two," Cherek said. He exited the airspeeder. Mapper and Joram followed. Livintius scooted over to be behind the controls. He had been thrilled to be made the speeder-man, the unit's getaway specialist, for this operation.

On the short walk over, Cherek said, "Now, how do we get from the basement to the cell block?"

They walked in silence for a minute while Joram formulated his response. Finally he said, "I have an idea -- a partial idea, anyway. But there's a problem with it that I just can't work out. So it probably won't succeed."

"Probably not," Cherek agreed. "Let's hear it."

"We have Livintius watch the front entrance for a few minutes. At the point a unit of PlanSec agents brings in one or more prisoners, we have Tinian and another one of us stand by at the basement door, peeking out. She and the other fall in behind the agents and their prisoner, and see if they can get into the secure hall on their shirttails. Livintius can run back to the speeder then."

"Ah," Cherek said. "But Tinian's the only one of us in uniform. Even if they let her in, why would they let the other one in?"

"He's her prisoner, see. Hands bound behind his back, he puts on a perpetrator face ... you know."

Cherek nodded, considering. "So what's the insoluble problem with this plan?"

"Well, of the three of us, none of us is dumb enough looking, or disreputable enough looking, to pass as a criminal."

"Ah." Cherek thought about that as they turned the corner, crossed the narrow traffic lane between the security building and the building adjacent to it, and reached what had to be the access to Tinian's door -- a flight of duracrete steps descending into shadow. The three of them looked around, making sure that no one was watching, and trotted down the stairs.

Cherek said, "Joram, it's time for you to redeem yourself. I'm sure you can pull off that role. It's almost no acting required."

Joram made his voice light, his tone naive. "You really think so?"

"I do." Cherek clapped him on the shoulder, then rapped on the door.

\* \* \*

Her hand on the small of his back, occasionally shoving to propel him forward, Tinian kept Joram close behind the trio of uniformed PlanSec agents and their prisoner, a spindly woman who persisted in complaining that she'd divorced the man, that he was now remarried on Corellia, that she had no Republic leanings.

The secure portions of the building seemed packed with PlanSec agents, all energetic, all discussing the war to come. Snatches of defense plans, evacuation plans, and retaliation plans drifted past. Joram knew that he had to be pallid and sweating but decided that it would merely lend authenticity to his role.

Then they were past the first set of offices and cross-corridors, leaving most of the crowd behind.

A uniformed officer up ahead -- tall, balding, with a build like an athlete twenty years younger than his apparent age -- noticed them. "What'ya got there, guardswoman?"

"Prisoner delivery," Tinian said. "From Dandahass, that's my station. This guy was named by one of your prisoners and wants to work a deal. He's a Republic Intelligence contact."

"One of our prisoners?" The officer eyed Joram speculatively. Joram held his gaze for a moment but then broke eye contact as if unable to withstand the man's stare.

They were close enough now to the man that Tinian could drop her tone. "Yes, your guy is..." She consulted her datapad, unnecessarily. "Edbit Teeks. This one, Varpo Prabb, admits to being his main connection among native Tarhassians."

"Good, good." The officer gestured for them to follow, then led them down the corridor. "Teeks. Fine work. Come into my office."

Joram and Tinian followed, Joram taking as fast an impression as he could of the office. He saw a semi-opaque viewport for privacy, chairs that seemed skeletal compared to all the others he'd encountered here, a desk heaped with stacks of reports, datachips, odd-shaped knickknacks.

For the moment, they were out of sight of anyone in the hallway, Tinian drew her blaster -- Renkel's blaster. "Don't move."

The officer froze. Joram could see him calculating -- was it worth it to shout and warn his fellows when it might mean death? Was there any chance this woman would hesitate, not fire at all?

Joram kned the officer in the groin, putting all his mass into it. The officer folded forward. His groan was loud enough to carry, but the noise from the hallway was also loud. Joram twisted his wrists out of the bonds loosely wrapped around them and tapped the wall button; the door slid shut with a *whoosh*. Then he took a metal model of a PlanSec corvette from the desktop and brought it down on the back of the man's head. It took three blows, but the officer finally fell unconscious.

"Horam, I'm not sure I'm fit to do this," Tinian said. Her voice was shaky. She looked at the blaster in her hand as if puzzling out what to do with it next. "I'm not a killer like you and Mapper."

"We're not killers like us, either." Joram weighed matters. Compartmentalizing information was usually a good idea, but not when it caused distrust among allies one depended on for survival. "The Renkel woman is still alive."

"What?"

"She is. Cherek and Livintius don't know. Listen, you're doing fine. Get this man's restraints from his belt clip and bind him. Then gag him." Joram reached down to pull the man's datapad from his belt pouch. "Let's find Teeks."

\* \* \*

At this hour, the second-floor cell and interrogation area were lightly guarded and trafficked. Tinian, again working her prisoner-delivery story, put Joram in front of an outer-perimeter guard, then an inner-perimeter guard. Each time, while pretending to hand the guard her datapad with the documents on her prisoner, she lured the guard into reaching through the bars for it. Joram grabbed each man in turn, dragged him into the bars, and held him there while Tinian stunned him with Renkel's blaster. Then the identity disk of the officer they'd captured downstairs gave them access into the detention area beyond.



Finally, they stood outside the cell marked with the number that corresponded to Teeks. Joram could see through the transparisteel panel in the door; a middle-aged man of medium build, a light and unkempt beard on his face, dressed in prisoner pastel violet, was asleep on the cell's bunk. On the far wall, a high viewport admitted exterior light. Joram waved the officer's identity disk in front of the door sensor, but its readout remained resolutely red.

Joram keyed his comlink. "Grimtaash-Five to One, come in."

"This is Grimtaash-Four." It was Mappers voice.

"Four, where's One?"

"Asleep."

Joram grinned. "How'd that happen?"

"I didn't make him any promises, Five. He bumped his head."

"Right. We're just outside the pickup point. We're going to need a distraction as soon as possible. A big, loud one. Do that, then exit. We'll be coming out on the north face, too. Three, are you ready to stand by?"

"Moving into position." Livintius's voice was unnaturally high. "What do you mean, he's sleeping?"

"Well, he's waking up. Still a bit groggy. And he's going to be mad. I'll be ready with your distraction in thirty seconds."

"Set it off, don't wait for further instructions." Joram pocketed his comlink, then began setting up his explosive charge on the cell door.

Moments later, there was a muffled boom from below. It seemed to have little effect. There was a faint vibration in the floor, but there were no shrieks, no rattling of ceilings and walls, no cascades of duracrete dust from above.

Then the sirens started. They were shrill whooping noises, a constant cycle of auditory pain. The comlink Joram had stolen from the unconscious officer blared with its own message: "Intruders, basement level. We've had an explosion event. Repeat, an explosion event."

Suddenly there was a face on the other side of the viewport: Teeks, awake but sleepy, confused. Joram keyed the comlink on the door. "Teeks, get against the far wall, cover yourself with your mattress." Teeks nodded and disappeared.

Joram set the timer on his charge, then he and Tinian withdrew along the corridor and around the first corner. Faces now filled most of the cell viewports. Some of these men and women were hammering, others talking, some pleading with nothing but their expressions. Joram ignored them.

He and Tinian were barely in place when the charge blew, hurling metal fragments all along the corridor. They rushed back into the cell. Teeks rose from behind his improvised barrier. "Tell me this is a rescue."

[[IMAGE.JPG]]

"This is a rescue," Joram said. "I'm Joram. This is Tinian." He slapped his other explosive charge on the exterior wall just beside Teeks' knees. He set the timer for thirty seconds. "Tinian, cover the hallway."

Teeks moved away from the new explosive. He took his mattress with him. "Do you know anything about my girlfriend? Is she under suspicion? Under arrest?"

"No, she's not. She's safe." Joram moved away from the explosive, watched its timer count down, and something clicked into place for him. *Renkel should be under suspicion. The fact that she's not suggests that PlanSec is certain that she's innocent. Which they shouldn't. Unless they have inside information about Teeks' personal life and knew she wasn't part of his team. But how would they know that and yet not know to pick up contacts like Tharb?*

An agent would include personal details in his reports, but keep information about his resources, his contacts, secret.

So PlanSec has access to information from Teeks' reports to his Intelligence superior. Maybe to the reports themselves.

Tinian said, "Five."

"What?"

"Four," she said.

"Oh." Joram joined her and Teeks behind the mattress.

"Three. Two. One."

The wall blew out, this explosion sending duracrete dust into the air -- mostly outward. Before the echoes had faded, Joram ran forward and peered out through the hole. Below, the walkway and landspeeder lane were littered with chunks of duracrete. Cherek's rented airspeeder was parked twenty meters off to the right, directly in front of the basement doorway access. Mapper and Cherek, the latter staggering slightly, were already emerging from the stairwell.

"Are you fit for a one-story drop?" Joram asked. He had to shout; his hearing wasn't what it should be, and he assumed that the hearing of his companions was similarly affected.

"Rather too late to ask," Teeks shouted. "But yes."

"After you," Tinian shouted.

Joram slid feet-first through the hole, its broken edges scraping across his back, and dropped. He landed on the unyielding walkway and continued his motion into a forward roll, a little clumsy -- his back would be bruised tomorrow. But it was better than having a broken ankle or twisted knee. He stood.

Teeks hit the walkway behind him, rolled nimbly to his feet, and gestured up for Tinian to follow.

Ahead, Mapper, on the street side of the airspeeder, and Cherek, on the walkway side, had its doors open.

Then a uniformed PlanSec officer, a young man with dark hair, leaped as if catapulted up from the basement stairway and planted his blaster in Cherek's side. Even with his diminished hearing, Joram could hear the man's shout of "Do not move!"

Joram grimaced. It was amateur against amateur. No well-trained guardsman with a blaster would get that close to a perpetrator. And Cherek didn't have the sense to Cherek raised his hands as if to surrender, then made a move to knock the blaster aside.

The guardsman fired. Cherek, his chest smoking, a surprised look on his face, fell. The guardsman adjusted his aim toward Mapper and Livintius.

Tinian's blaster shot struck him across the neck and shoulders. The man jerked and fell.

Mapper had Cherek in the back seat before Joram and the others reached the airspeeder. Livintius had the airspeeder in motion before they'd dogged the doors closed.

And they had a kilometer between them and the PlanSec building before the first security speeder left the building.

\* \* \*

Mapper straightened from beside Cherek's bed. They were back in the dubious and temporary security of Cherek's chambers. "I think he'll live," Mapper said.

But Cherek did not respond to the hopeful pronouncement; his chest bandaged, his eyes closed, he remained in the sleep of the badly injured.

Teeks rose from the room's puffy chair. "I don't mean to sound ungrateful, but you'd better get off-world before they have enough information to catch you."

"We can't leave him," Livintius said. He continued to eye Joram with suspicion, as if Joram had shot Cherek by remote control.

"Yes, you can," Teeks said. "Get him into the speeder and I'll take him to a safe house. I have safe houses, cover identities, money accounts all over."

Livintius shook his head. "They're bound to be compromised. By your dead lover."

"Zazana doesn't know anything about my work." Teeks shrugged. "I expect to tell her about it when I propose to her."

Livintius pointed an accusing finger at Joram. "You didn't tell him--" Joram put a finger to his lips to shush the academic.

\* \* \*

Joram didn't begin to relax until he could see Tarhassan shrinking in the holocam view on the screen in the transport's main cabin. In minutes, they'd be jumping to hyperspace, headed for a planet that remained neutral as war flared up all around it. From there, they could make their way back to Coruscant. Meanwhile, he'd privately warned Teeks against communicating with Republic Intelligence or accessing accounts he'd mentioned in his reports -- at least, not until Joram could form an impression of how Teeks had been exposed.

The sound of tapping distracted him from the screen. He looked over to see Tinian working on her datapad. "What's this?"

She gave him a smile. "My report."

"What?" He looked down at its diminutive screen. "It's not in proper outline format. Nor do I see any contributions from Livintius."

"He can file his own report. In the meantime, mine will become the official truth of the mission to Tarhassan."

"What is the official truth? So my truth matches your truth, that is."

"Cherek planned, Livintius and I researched, you and Mapper executed, all until the big show at the end. Then we all executed and Cherek got shot playing hero. I also mention that Livintius, Cherek, and I could use more training, some mentoring by senior agents. In any case, everybody did good."

"Did well," Joram corrected, absently. "You learn fast."

"I suspect I'm going to need to."

He reached over to shake her hand. "Welcome to Intelligence."